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The lead time is inversely proportional to the confidence in the judgment

ALERT MEMORANDA—THE TRACK RECORD

[redacted] (b)(3) (b)(6)

The *Alert Memorandum* is an interagency publication issued by the Director of Central Intelligence on behalf of the Intelligence Community. It warns explicitly of impending potential developments abroad that may have serious implications for US interests. It is a fast reaction document, with usually no more than forty-eight hours transpiring between conception and promulgation. While designed primarily for the Washington policy community, it receives wide electrical dissemination abroad. Additionally, each memorandum is published in the next *National Intelligence Daily* to further inform consumers of national level concern.

The Alert Memorandum was an active vehicle between 1974 and 1976. When the Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence for Strategic Warning rotated to a new position in 1976, the position was left unfilled and Alert Memoranda fell into disuse. In October 1978, a National Intelligence Officer for Warning was appointed, largely in response to Congressional demands for a central point of warning responsibility, and the Director of Central Intelligence concurrently revivified Alert Memoranda. Since then, [redacted] have been issued. (b)(3)

The decision to publish an Alert Memorandum is reserved to the Director of Central Intelligence, although anyone in the policy or intelligence communities may request he do so. In practice, the National Intelligence Officer for Warning usually has taken the initiative.

An Alert Memorandum is not predictive; rather, it explores the possible outcome of development abroad which have serious implications for US policy. In fact, the greater the potentially adverse effect on US policy, the lower the threshold for issuing an Alert Memorandum.

It is aximomatic that the amount of lead time is inversely proportional to the confidence of the community's judgment. There has been a constant, and probably healthy, struggle between the warners, who wish to act earlier, and the analysts, who like to wait for more evidence in order to buttress their confidence. There is also the risk of false alarms, of "crying wolf" and flooding the market with warnings. In the final analysis, there is no rule of thumb. Each incipient crisis has been judged on its own merits, and the decision whether to issue an Alert Memorandum has been unique to the problem at hand.

The Track Record

I. *Iran:* On 29 November 1978, the Director of Central Intelligence warned, "the Shia Muslim holy month of Moharram that begins on 2 December 1978 is likely to bring an especially severe challenge to the Shah of Iran and to the military government installed by the Shah in early November." (This was the first in the new series of Alert Memoranda.) In a second Alert Memorandum on 5 December, the Director's judgment was, "we see no reason to alter our conclusions that civil unrest may threaten

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the survival of the monarchy, and that the risk to Americans will increase. Serious demonstrations began in Tehran and the provincial cities at the outset of Moharram, and will continue to build, taxing the resources and morale of the military and security services." The Shah departed Tehran on 16 January 1979, about six weeks after the first Alert Memorandum, and the Bakhtiar government which he had installed collapsed on 10 February. A third Alert Memorandum, published on 1 March 1979, warned, "the Bazargan Government may not survive the combined pressures posed by internal friction and a sustained external challenge from the left." On 6 November 1979, the Bazargan Government fell (two days after the American Embassy was occupied). In this case, about nine months warning had been given.

II. *Beagle Channel:* On 8 December 1978, as Argentina was moving substantial military forces south to strengthen its claims in the Beagle Channel area, an Alert Memorandum warned, "Argentina will be prepared to make a military move after 15 December. Should hostilities break out, Chile will almost certainly invoke the Rio Treaty." The Pope intervened, and the situation subsequently quieted down. This Alert Memorandum was the first to refer explicitly to United States policy considerations—involving the Rio Treaty—a trend which was to continue.

III. *China-Vietnam:* On 5 January 1979, the Director of Central Intelligence warned that "Vietnamese military operations against Kampuchea are proceeding rapidly in the face of only token resistence from out-gunned and out-manned Kampuchean units. With some Vietnamese forces already west of the Mekong River and within striking distance of Phnom Penh, it is possible that the capital could fall or be abandoned in the next several days and a Vietnamese client regime be established there. At the same time, China appears to be preparing for a major show of force along its frontier with Vietnam. Thus, the present situation contains the seeds of rapid escalation to Sino-Vietnamese conflict and heightened Sino-Soviet tension." Phnom Penh fell two days later on 7 January. On 19 January, a second Alert Memorandum reported, "the Chinese appear to be completing a deployment of forces and a propaganda groundwork that will enable them to take military action against Vietnam at a time of their choosing." A third Alert Memorandum on 14 February 1979, said, "the Chinese buildup along the Vietnamese border has grown unabated since our last Alert Memorandum of 19 January. We think that in military terms the Chinese are ready to go, and that their push, if it occurs, would be larger than we thought in mid-January." The Chinese punitive action started on 22 February. Six weeks of warning had been given.

IV. *Pakistan:* On 8 February 1979, an Alert Memorandum opined that upholding the death sentence of former Prime Minister Bhutto would place Zia's position in heightened jeopardy. Obviously, Zia survived. This was the first instance, however, of an Alert Memorandum being used to gain attention while policymakers were preoccupied with another crisis (China/Vietnam).

V. *Lebanon:* On 2 March 1979, an Alert Memorandum stated, "Christian Militias and Syrian forces in Beirut seem to be heading for a new outbreak of heavy fighting within the next two months." It then discussed the possibility of an Israeli-Syrian confrontation. While the situation in Lebanon did not result in an Israeli-Syrian clash, once again the Alert Memorandum raised policy implications for the United States Government.

VI. *Egypt/Libya:* Sadat and Quadhaffi's mutual animosity results in a perennial warning situation. On 29 March 1979, an Alert Memorandum warned, "tension along the border has been heightened by alerts and troop movements by both sides, and has increased the chances that war will break out either by deliberate attack or by

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unpremeditated escalation of border incidents." On 1 August 1979, the Director of Central Intelligence warned that "the Egyptian plan for a large-scale military incursion into eastern Libya—scheduled for later this month or September—is still on track." This Alert Memorandum, too, went on to discuss the implications for United States policy. The attack has yet to materialize, but the root problem remains.

VII. *Cuban Troops in South Africa:* On 27 April 1979, the Director of Central Intelligence reported, "there has been accumulation of reports and rumors recently which suggests that some number of Cuban forces, or possibly a significant increment of advisory personnel, are about to be introduced into Frontline States contending with Rhodesia. The intelligence is by no means conclusive, but I believe that the situation bears especially close watching at this time, and I am making you aware of my concern." This Alert Memorandum provided a good example of the lower threshold assigned to a potential event of very high political significance; it was published on extremely fragmentary information. While Cuban troops did appear later on, their arrival was not related to the evidence sited in this Alert Memorandum—it was a false alarm.

VIII. *Nicaragua:* In a 12 June 1979 Alert Memorandum entitled "Marxist Threat to Somoza in Nicaragua," the Director of Central Intelligence estimated that the possibility of a victory by the Sandinistas "looms large." Somoza fell on 17 July, five weeks later.

IX. *Basques:* On 19 June 1979, while all eyes were on Nicaragua, the Director of Central Intelligence warned that the Basque autonomy negotiations were encountering problems, and that Prime Minister Suarez was under strong pressure to resort to force. Once again, the Alert Memorandum served to focus attention on a secondary, simultaneous potential crisis.

X. *Afghanistan:* The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan provided probably the most serious policy crisis during the period covered in this paper. It prompted three Alert Memoranda. The first, on 14 September 1979, said, "The Soviet leaders may be on the threshold of a decision to commit their own forces to prevent the collapse of the Taraki regime and protect their sizeable stake in Afghanistan." Further, "the Soviets may now be more inclined to gamble on a substantial intervention in Afghanistan." The second, on 19 December, reported, "the Soviet leaders have crossed a significant threshold in their growing military involvement in Afghanistan." And, "the Soviets are building up other more substantial forces near the Soviet-Afghan border." The third, on Christmas day, reported—correctly—that the invasion probably had begun. About twelve weeks warning had been given.

XI. *El Salvador:* A 5 October 1979 Alert Memorandum predicted the coup which took place on 15 October, and highlighted the possibility of "an opening for extreme leftists to organize a general insurrection." In a following Alert Memorandum on 24 January 1980, the judgment was that "a leftist extremist thrust for power . . . could come at any time, and with little warning."

XII. *Pakistani Nuclear Test:* On 11 October 1979,

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XIII. *Thai-Kampuchea Border:* On 6 December 1979, an Alert Memorandum reiterated that the increasing pressure Vietnam was placing on Thailand might cause

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the Thai to invoke the assistance of the Manila Pact or seek an accommodation with Vietnam if all else failed. Again, policy implications were highlighted.

XIV. *Saudi Arabia/Yemens:* On 11 January 1980, an Alert Memorandum discussed the implications that Yemeni unity might have for Saudi Arabia and the United States.

XV. *South Korea:* Following the assassination of President Park on 26 October 1979, two Alert Memoranda were issued. On 8 February 1980, the Director of Central Intelligence said, "I am concerned that a showdown in Seoul, which may involve open fighting, will lead to North Korean miscalculations." The showdown did not result in open fighting, but on 9 May 1980, a second Alert Memorandum reported, "while what we have observed of North Korean reactions to developments in the South since the Park assassination does not yet suggest an intention to exploit the situation militarily, I continue to be concerned about the adequacy of warning on Korea. In this light, the current South Korean unrest, which brings with it the possibility of a military takeover, is yet another in a series of recent events that could undermine stability in the South and tempt Pyongyang to attack."

XVI. *Syria:* In July 1980, the administration's attention was rivetted on Iran and Afghanistan. Once again, to direct it to another potential problem, the Director of Central Intelligence on 11 July reported, "Although not imminent, Syrian President Assad's assassination or overthrow is significantly more likely today than it was before the 26 June assassination attempt. I believe that United States policymakers need to focus sooner rather than later on the potential adverse regional consequences of Assad's removal from the scene. The attached Alert Memorandum outlines briefly some of these regional implications."

XVII. *Poland:* On 19 July 1980, an Alert Memorandum noted, "Labor unrest in Poland has dramatically increased in recent days in the Southeast city of Lublin. While our information about unrest in other areas of Poland is sparse, it is possible that disturbances will intensify and expand to other areas." On 19 September, a second reported, "Soviet military activity detected in the last few days leads me to believe that the Soviet leadership is preparing to intervene militarily in Poland if the Polish situation is not brought under control in a manner satisfactory to Moscow. Recent events in Poland itself suggest that the Kania regime may encounter severe difficulties in meeting Moscow's requirements." In a third, published 25 November, the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence said, "The Polish leadership is facing its gravest challenge since the strikes on the Baltic Coast in August. I am concerned the Kania regime may resort to force. The present situation moves us closer to coercive measures by the regime or a possible Soviet military invasion." In a fourth on 2 December, the Director opined, "I believe the Soviets are readying their forces for military intervention in Poland. We do not know, however, whether they have made the decision to intervene, or are still attempting to find a political solution." Finally, a fifth memorandum on 2 April 1981, judged, "We believe that the Soviet leaders have been convinced by the evident impotence of the Polish party and government that military intervention is necessary."

XVIII. *Iran-Iraq:* On 17 September 1980, an Alert Memorandum reported, "the intensification of border clashes between Iran and Iraq has reached a point where a serious conflict is now a distinct possibility." The war started five days later, on 22 September.

XIX. *Iran-Kuwait:* On 14 November 1980, the Director of Central Intelligence warned that "recent attacks by Iranian aircraft on Kuwaiti border installations raise the possibility that Tehran is now prepared to widen the war in order to stop Arab aid

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to Iraq. I believe the greatest danger—should Iran continue this course of action—is the possibility that Kuwait or other Arab oil facilities will become targets for Iranian attacks."

What Did We Miss?

If, on the one hand, we examine those crises which were anticipated and of which we warned, the other side of the coin may reveal situations which we missed altogether. This, of course, raises the questions of thresholds and relevance to US policy. While Poland's importance is obvious, a coup in Guinea-Bissau may be of little more than passing interest.

For some time the Cybernetics Technology Division of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency has been conducting research in the area of crisis identification and prediction. Among their efforts is an Executive Aids System based on open source data. Querying that data base yielded more "crises" than those treated by Alert Memoranda, to wit:

(b)(1)
(b)(3)

September 1978
November 1978
December 1978
January 1979

January 1979

January 1979

February 1979

February 1979

February 1979
July 1979
July 1979

July 1979

September 1979

October 1979
November 1979

November 1979

December 1979
February 1980

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(b)(1)
(b)(3)

April 1980
April 1980

April 1980
May 1980

June 1980

The reader is left to ponder which of these situations might have deserved Alert Memoranda.

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